



Editorial

It is a great pleasure for us to present this fourth issue of the Journal of Forest and Livelihood, which is also the 26th mailing of the Rural Development Forestry Network (RDFN). We have taken the opportunity of this joint issue to showcase some UK-funded research on the impacts of community forestry in Nepal. By allocating all of this issue to discussion of projects funded by one specific agency, in this case the UK Department for International Development (DFID), the Journal of Forest and Livelihood launches its new strategy of encouraging joint publications and anticipates responses from prospective collaborators.

Since the early days of community forestry in the 1980s, Nepal has been promoted as the country where the approach has spread most widely and with strong legislation in place. Widespread application of this model of participatory forest management has also led to intense scrutiny and refinement to address concerns of livelihood, equity and resource sustainability. As a growing number of countries around the world are implementing community forestry, many are adopting Nepal's Forest User Group (FUG) approach as a model. With nearly 30 years of experience of various forms of community forestry now under its belt, accompanied by a large amount of reflection on its constraints and opportunities, we felt it was time to present the Nepali experience to readers around the world.

In this issue we present seven papers based on three research projects, all funded by DFID. These papers outline some of the key issues arising in the application of community forestry in Nepal today. For the benefit of the many RDFN readers who are not familiar with Nepal, we have taken the liberty of including some more historical and descriptive sections in the papers. We hope these will provide sufficient background to enable readers to draw out the lessons applicable to their own contexts. We should add that the papers focus entirely on the experience to-date in the low-value, and often degraded, forests of the Middle hills, and do not touch on Nepal's more recent attempts to implement community forestry in the more valuable forests of the lowland *Terai* region.

The first paper by Springate-Baginski and colleagues provides a general overview of the history and current status of community forestry in Nepal. It also describes the methodology and study sites for the project reported on in the next four papers. A particular focus of the paper are the difficulties inherent in establishing and supporting FUGs, the changing role of the Department of Forests in this process, and the need for involving multiple support agencies to support diverse service needs of FUGs.

In their second paper, Springate-Baginski and colleagues present an assessment of institutional development of 11 case study FUGs, using performance indicators defined by FUG members themselves. The need for flexible and demand-led post-formation support to help FUGs address a wide range of issues including conflicts, forest management planning and enterprise development is highlighted as a particularly critical issue.

In the third paper, Nagendra Prasad Yadav and colleagues focus on the impact of community forestry on vegetative resources, confirming improved forest conditions and increased streams of benefit flows. Potential production could be increased even further if community forest boundaries were clearly established from the start and FUGs were shown how to shift from 'passive' (i.e. protection-oriented) to 'active' (production-oriented) management of their forest resources.

Om Prakash Dev and colleagues argue strongly for the need for planning to take place at the level of the individual *toles* (hamlets) that make up each FUG. They present an approach for micro-level action planning piloted in 11 FUGs which led to significant improvements in terms

of helping to address elite-biases in decision-making, and negotiating more inclusive and equitable livelihood and community development initiatives.

In their second paper, Om Prakash Dev and colleagues argue that community forestry in Nepal is becoming 'livelihood forestry'. There is a clear shift away from the original focus on increasing product flows to broader livelihood activities including mobilization of community forestry funds and making greater use of the improved institutional capacity built up in communities around the FUGs.

The paper by Yam Malla and colleagues examines levels of participation in, understanding of and benefit from, community forestry. Poorer households were found to benefit significantly less than less poor households and may even be disadvantaged by the advent of community forestry. A major cause of inequity is that FUG committees are dominated by wealthier households who also have much greater awareness of a range of community forestry issues and are often socially privileged to influence FUG institutional processes.

Although there is much discussion about the equity impacts of community forestry, there is relatively little quantitative evidence on the collection of forest products across different socio-economic groups. Michael Richards and colleagues attempt to remedy this by providing FUGs with a quantitative tool to monitor the equity impacts of community forestry. Their research in five FUGs confirms that poorer groups are sometimes relatively disadvantaged by community forestry. The real interest of this paper, however, lies in its comparison of different methodological approaches to assessing distributional outcomes of community forestry. While participatory approaches were found to engender greater ownership of the results, household surveys combined with key informant interviews provided more reliable figures.

Overall, the seven papers provide critical insights into the process, impact and challenges of community forestry in Nepal. The issues reflected in this Journal permeate current policy debates in Nepal, and can be addressed through more effective collaboration among communities, government and civil society. We hope the papers in this joint issue will stimulate reflection amongst all our readers about the lessons to be learned from community forestry in Nepal for application elsewhere in the world. Of particular interest may be the clear conclusion that community forestry can no longer be seen as simply meeting the dual objectives of conservation and poverty alleviation, but that it also may have a much more important role in empowering local people to take action on issues beyond forest management.

We are grateful to the Natural Resources Systems Programme and the Forestry Research Programme of the UK Department for International Development for funding the production of this journal. Furthermore, we would particularly like to thank Tejaswini Apte for her excellent editing of the first five papers.

Since this special issue is primarily targeted to papers submitted for publication by the RDFN, we have not been able to accommodate other equally important papers. Previously submitted manuscripts will be considered for the next issue of the Journal.

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